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september 27, 1999

the guide

Chicago IT careers

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winds of change

The information technology job market in Chicago is in a whirlwind of change. Permanent staff employees are jumping ship in record numbers, lured by high demand, new opportunities and larger paychecks. For those with the right skills and experience, salaries are rising in the local market at a rate nearly twice that for IT professionals nationally.

Meanwhile, contractors are finding themselves in reduced demand as companies wrap up their year 2000 conversion efforts. And consultants are being told to impact their clients' bottom line or their services are no longer required.

In *Computerworld*'s first Guide to IT Careers in Chicago, we look at what these changes mean for the IT professional now and offer advice on which jobs and skills to invest in for the future.

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David Weldon, *Computerworld*

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high demand for hot skills

the CHICAGO market is hungry for IT PROFESSIONALS with the latest skills, but there is also need in just about every other IT area

By Steve Alexander

The strong economy in the Chicago market continues to drive up demand for information technology professionals in most industry sectors, leading to salary increases in the range of 8% to 12% in the past year.

Hiring appears to be driven less by expansion of IT staffs and more by high turnover and proliferating job opportunities. As a result, staff turnover and corporate raiding are major challenges for IT employers, and signing bonuses are becoming a common recruiting tool.

For IT managers, that sometimes means fighting for higher IT salaries. For IT professionals, it means the ability to pick and choose jobs without worrying about where the next one will come from.

Demand

Jobs and skills in the local market include programmers with Unix and Windows NT experience and Java and C++ skills. Also in demand are LAN managers, database administrators and project managers.

"Everybody is looking for enterprise experts and programmer analysts," says David Lemme, CIO at Anixter International Inc., a Skokie, Ill.-based reseller of electronic components for the telephone industry. "There also is a lot of demand for people to develop and manage LANs. Our company has been raided for LAN people." He's looking for Unix and NT programmers, as well as IMS, DB2 and Oracle database administrators.

High demand means that some skills are especially tough to find. Jeff Schnee, CIO at BSMG Worldwide, a New York-based public relations firm with operations in Chicago, says it's difficult to hire PC support people with relational database experience and systems management people with experience in databases, wide-area networks, NT, Microsoft Exchange and Novell networks.

"What I'm finding is that there are plenty of people at the entry level. Unfortunately, that's not what I'm looking for," Schnee says. "The hardest thing for me to hire is someone with five to eight years' experience in networking (mainly Novell and NT) and applications support, including communications."

Bob Becker, director of hospital information sys-

Marc Berlow

tems at Chicago-based Sinai Health System, blames the lack of experienced people on migration to states where the weather is warmer and the pay is higher. "There continues to be an exodus of talent. I've been approached to move to Texas, California and Washington," he says.

Many firms desperately need experienced IT people "because the institutions we work for expect us to be able to solve their problems right away," Becker says. "If I send somebody who is not trained to do a job, they can learn it, but the pace that's required does not afford them any time for mistakes. If that inexperienced person doesn't have what it takes, we end up sending two people to every meeting because we can't leave that new person alone."

Some IT managers hire contractors to fill the employment gaps, while others cross-train non-IT people for IT jobs and still others choose to defer work for lack of staff.

"We're approaching people outside of the IT department and asking them if they want a career here," Lemme says. "We've picked up some finance people that way. Finding people who are interested in moving into IT is not a problem because they see the big dollars."

Salaries

Well-publicized job opportunities have also led to well-publicized salary increases. But Sean O'Malley, an IT recruiter at gas utility company Peoples Energy Co. in Chicago, says the salary-increase numbers often are skewed by consultant salaries. He says you probably had to be a consultant to get a raise of 12% or more last year and adds that salaries for full-time employees probably have gone up by less than 10%.

At the Chicago Board of Trade, the average salary has risen 10% from a year ago, but Java programmers, project managers and Unix system administrators with "heavy integration skills" have gotten higher increases, says CIO Jim Amaral.

As a result of salary increases, Lemme says, a Unix programmer with three to five years of experience can earn $60,000 to $75,000, and an Oracle database administrator with three to five years of experience can earn $70,000 to $85,000, with a few asking more than $90,000.

These sky-high salaries are turning recruiting and retention into major problems. Becker spent two years searching for an IT project manager for a hospital laboratory, only to have the man quit after three days to take a higher-paying consulting job at Ernst & Young LLP.

Becker has had to struggle to prevent more attrition. "I've had to fight with HR and payroll to raise the pay rates of the IT people who have been here a while," he says. He recently hired another project manager at $71,000, or $3,000 above the top salary Becker was supposed to pay.

Schnee says the salary of an NT programmer/analyst in the Chicago market with three to five years of experience is $40,000 to $55,000 per year. Dan Grant, president of recruiting firm MRI-Sales Consultants in Union, Ill., says a C++ programmer analyst with three to five years of experience can expect to earn $80,000, plus a signing bonus of around $5,000 or a profit-sharing plan.

The solution to worker mobility and ever-higher salaries is elusive, although institutions with bigger budgets for hiring and training seem to be faring better. One way to cope is to hire people with less experience and train them on the job,

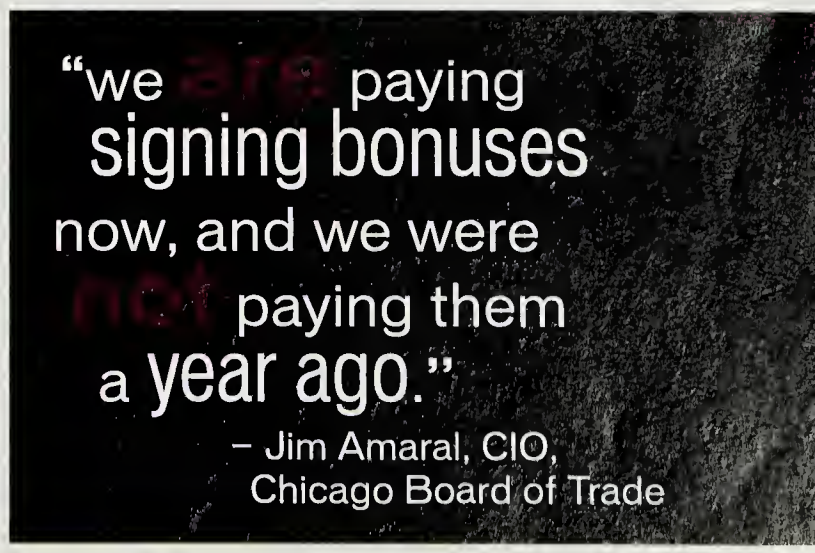
continued on page 6

Top IT jobs in the Chicago market

Rank/job title
1) Network administrator
2) Senior systems analyst
3) Project manager
4) PC technical-support specialist
5) Senior programmer/analyst
6) Programmer/analyst
7) Webmaster/Web designer
8) LAN manager
9) Computer operator
10) Technical support manager

Source: *Computerworld*'s 1999 Annual Hiring Survey, data for Chicago area

Marc Berlow



"everybody is looking for enterprise experts and programmer analysts . . . there is a lot of for people to develop and manage LANs."

– David Lemme, CIO, Anixter

Marc Berlow

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but that runs smack into another aspect of the worker shortage — there aren't enough IT people available to mentor all the new, inexperienced hires, Becker says.

Signing bonuses for nonmanagement people are becoming more common in the Chicago market, but some firms don't like to acknowledge it, Schnee says.

"They are doing it and doing it under the table," he says. "I haven't done it to date, but for the right person, I would consider it."

Some CIOs acknowledge that signing bonuses are becoming a way of life for highly sought-after skills.

"We are paying signing bonuses now, and we were not paying them a year ago," Amaral says. "When we have a job candidate with multiple job offers, we don't necessarily match the best one, but offer a combination of a signing bonus, a base salary adjustment, quicker review periods for salary increases and other benefits, such as more vacation time."

Due to shifting demand, the Chicago IT workforce is changing. Some skills are becoming easier to find. But the worry is that changing technology will create new shortages by creating a demand for new specialties.

Novell and NT network expertise is easier to find than it was a year ago. "Maybe that's one skill set in which the industry has done a good job of matching demand," Amaral says.

But Becker says he fears the availability of NT skills will be short-lived.

"What is going to happen when Windows 2000 comes out, which is NT at the workstation? It will introduce a whole new set of variables. NT is suddenly going to be more important, and there is going to be larger demand."

Amaral says he believes Chicago is just beginning to feel the effects of year 2000 work winding down. "There are a lot of people on the bench in the consulting houses. I don't see evidence of consulting houses letting people go, but there is a lot of interest in placing their people here," he says.

O'Malley agrees. He says many consultants are looking for full-time jobs now that Y2K work is coming to an end.

With a few exceptions, large-scale hiring plans seem centered on replacing staff lost to turnover. Lemme says he hopes to maintain his IT staff at about 160 but figures turnover will mean hiring 10 to 12 more people by the end of the year. O'Malley says he expects his firm's 200-employee IT shop will hire 25 people this year, mostly due to turnover.

In a workforce with many employment opportunities, lifestyle issues are becoming increasingly important in hiring. Some suggest that because salaries are finally roughly competitive, other factors are coming into play.

At a time when IT professionals may routinely work 50 to 60 hours per week and often more, IT managers say people may seek out a new job just because it's closer to home.

"The people who are leaving us are looking for better opportunity or location, and lately it seems like it's location," Lemme says. "Everybody is putting in so many hours — on a good week here, it's 50-plus hours, and when we installed PeopleSoft financials, it was 70 to 95 hours — that if there is an opportunity to be a little closer to home, they take it. They figure if they can cut half an hour off their commute in each direction, they can spend a little more time at home."

Hiring trends in Chicago

Who's hiring:	
Companies expanding their IT staff	70%
Companies keeping their IT staffs at same level	30%
Companies planning to reduce their IT staff	0%
How much hiring is going on?	
Percentage of staff increases planned by companies hiring	20%*

* Figure comes from the 70% of companies that reported they will increase staff this year.
Source: *Computerworld*'s 1999 Annual Hiring Survey, data for Chicago area

Alexander is a freelance writer in Edina, Minn. Contact him at sorion@ix.netcom.com.

paying the IT game

current salaries for IT managers and professionals in CHICAGO

TOP IS MANAGEMENT	Salary	Bonuses	Total
CIO/Vice President of IS/IT Top IS/IT executive for the organization, enterprisewide	$134,200	$22,500	$156,700
Director of IS/IT Top IS/IT executive for a business unit or division	$95,600	$13,800	$109,400
Director, Systems Development Directs systems management and applications programming	$99,700	$13,700	$113,400
Director of IS/IT Operations Top executive of data center and operations group	$82,400	$9,400	$91,800
Director of Networks Top networking executive, manages voice/data communications	$81,000	$8,100	$89,100

NETWORKS			
Manager of Voice & Data Comm. Manages voice and data communications	$74,300	$8,800	$83,100
LAN Manager Responsible for planning, designing and operating the LAN	$67,600	$4,500	$72,100
Communications Specialist Provides technical expertise for voice and data communications	$61,000	$2,300	$63,300
Network Administrator/Analyst Administers, defines,updates and maintains networks	$55,300	$3,400	$58,700

SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT AND INTEGRATION			
Project Manager, Systems & Prog. Defines project system requirements and procedures to complete them	$78,800	$8,900	$87,700
Manager Internet/Intranet Tech. Manages all Internet or intranet development and operations	$77,500	$6,100	$83,600
Database Manager Directs database design, programming and maintenance	$75,500	$6,700	$82,200
Project Leader Organizes and monitors personnel and resources involved in project implementation	$72,200	$6,000	$78,200
Senior Systems Analyst Designs advanced system requirements to solve business problems	$65,500	$4,100	$69,600
Database Analyst Develops both physical and logical database functions	$62,400	$2,000	$64,400

	Salary	Bonuses	Total
Systems Analyst/Administrator Analyzes business processes and designs basic system requirements	$58,700	$5,600	$64,300
Senior Systems Programmer Responsible for system software and operations	$67,100	$2,400	$69,500
Senior Programmer/Analyst Develops, tests and maintains advanced application programs	$62,300	$1,900	$64,200
Webmaster/Web Designer Responsible for Web development and maintenance	$59,100	$2,600	$61,700
Systems Programmer Performs basic system programmer tasks	$55,800	$1,500	$57,300
Programmer/Analyst Develops, tests and maintains basic application programs	$50,600	$2,700	$53,300

TECHNICAL SERVICE AND OPERATIONS			
Computer Operations/DP Mgr. Manages computer systems and data processing groups	$75,000	$4,500	$79,500
Computer Operations Supervisor Direct supervisor of computer operators	$57,700	$2,400	$60,100
Technical Specialist Provides technical support and monitors processing efficiencies	$48,700	$2,000	$50,700
Lead Computer Operator Responsible for scheduling, processing and distributing information	$42,700	$1,500	$44,200
Computer Operator Responsible for daily processing and backing-up of information	$34,400	$500	$34,900

PC END-USER SUPPORT			
Micro Manager/Computing Mgr. Responsible for company's PCs, ensuring compatibility with corporate strategies	$57,900	$3,000	$60,900
Tech. Support/Help Desk Mgr. Manages end-user hardware and/or software support	$55,800	$4,100	$59,900
PC Tech. Support Specialist Responsible for overall maintenance of PCs	$40,600	$600	$41,200
Help Desk Operator Answers user support questions	$37,700	$2,300	$40,000

Source: *Computerworld* survey of 72 Chicago-based IT hiring managers in July and August 1999

consultants & contractors:

banking on the millennium

By Sharon Watson

With the city's bumbling baseball teams, the bad-news Bears and the gutted, Jordan-less Bulls, is it any wonder Chicago's famed blues bars do a terrific business?

While "wait till next year" tends to be an empty phrase for Windy City sports fans, that line may take on a whole new meaning for anyone thinking of doing information technology contracting or consulting work in Chicago in 2000.

In short, IT consulting and contracting work in Chicago actually *is* poised to take off next year, say CIOs, consultants, contractors and industry watchers. They point to dozens of large and small IT projects that have been postponed while companies have thrown themselves into solving their year 2000 computing issues.

Lingering Y2K problems may slow business in the first quarter of 2000. After that, the demand for consultants and contractors should spiral up, as companies finally turn their attention to projects that were stuck on back burners while Y2K boiled over. Delayed projects range from e-commerce systems to introducing new packaged desktop applications, local CIOs say.

"The market is going to be exceptionally strong here in the next few years," says David Weinstein, assistant for technology development to Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. "Technology has charged ahead while people focused on Y2K, and now they want to move ahead, too."

Even with scores of contractors and consultants wrapping up Y2K projects, no one is predicting a glut of talent in the Chicago area.

"The percentage of revenues spent on IT will continue to grow so long as the economy is strong," says Richard Reck, a partner at KPMG LLP in Chicago. "You'll find the talent you need to spend that amount by turning to external resources."

The only contractors and consultants unlikely to do well in Chicago next year are those who have only Cobol and Y2K experience.

"I see lots of mainframe résumés from people coming out of Y2K projects," says Mark Giuliano, director of

Using an entrepreneurial atmosphere to attract talent: Arvind Talwar of Catalyst Consulting

depending on their backgrounds, **new hires** with graduate degrees and **three** to **five** years of experience can earn between **$75,000** and **$100,000.**

– According to Arvind Talwar, CEO and managing principal, Catalyst Consulting Group

resource management at MetroTechnologies LLC in Gurnee, Ill. "There's not a lot we can do for them now."

Giuliano and others suggest that post-Y2K refugees learn skills like Java, C++ and Visual Basic. And for consultants and contractors with experience in e-commerce or enterprise resource planning systems such as SAP, Baan, Vines and PeopleSoft, Chicago should be a very friendly market in 2000.

With that list of hot skills, it's no surprise that contractors and consultants say the most active work for them in 2000 will be in systems and applications related to e-commerce. Projects range from integrating Web sites with back-end databases, warehousing and distribution systems to developing data mining and knowledge management strategies and more.

In particular, business-to-business e-commerce will grow. "The area of supply-chain management is incredibly hot," says Kenneth Johnson, partner and location leader at Ernst & Young LLP in Chicago. Managing supplies through an entire life cycle, from inception to consumer delivery, is a challenge that local health care, manufacturing, retail and other businesses are eager to tackle, he says.

Among Chicago's wide variety of industries, staffing experts expect the area's financial services, transportation and distribution, and media and publishing markets to be especially hot for consultants. No sources could point to a single local industry lagging in technology projects. "Everyone seems to have gotten into the game," Reck says.

In addition, vertical market segments will have their own industry-specific projects to launch in the wake of Y2K, CIOs say. For example, the giant international law firm Sidley & Austin will be converting its huge document libraries to electronic formats, among other projects.

"After Y2K, we can't afford to take a breather because we have so many other projects getting hotter by the day," says Nancy Karan, the firm's CIO.

Finally, the Chicago area is proving very friendly to start-up technology firms, which run the gamut from consulting to Web hosting to software and hardware development and require the same skills their larger brethren do.

These smaller IT firms require more computer scientists and engineers than larger firms, which cite a greater need for programmers and analysts, according to a 1998 survey of Illinois IT employment needs by the Chicago Software Association, a trade group in Palatine, Ill.

Hiring demand for IT contractors

Rank/job title
1) Senior systems analyst
2) Senior programmer analyst
3) Webmaster/Web designer
4) PC technical support specialist
5) Project manager
6) Programmer/analyst

(Note: The above comes from the 70% of companies that reported they will increase staff this year.) Source: *Computerworld*'s 1999 Annual Hiring Survey, data for Chicago area

Rates rising

Such strong demand for IT talent is ensuring that contractors and consultants in Chicago earn competitive salaries, sources agree. Base salaries for less experienced or fresh graduates with degrees in computer science begin between $40,000 and $50,000. The range for experienced players varies.

At Andersen Consulting, an experienced non-manager-level consultant may earn a salary in the upper $80,000 range, says John Hohner, the firm's recruiting manager for such talent in the Chicago metropolitan region.

Depending on their backgrounds, new hires with graduate degrees and three to five years of experience can earn between $75,000 and $100,000 at Catalyst Consulting Group, says Arvind Talwar, the Chicago firm's CEO and managing principal.

At RHI Consulting Inc., which places techni-

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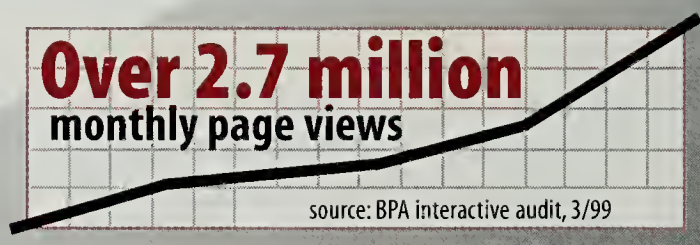

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cal talent on a project basis, hourly rates range from $20 for networking configuration to more than $90 for programming, says Marianne Marino, the area sales manager at the firm's Chicago office. "Rates are steadily climbing, with companies willing to pay more for people skills," she says.

In addition, many consulting firms offer bonuses, incentives and substantial training packages. For example, at Metro Technologies, consultants have opportunities to earn an additional $5,000 to $8,000 in bonuses, based on their project performance, and also receive $12,000 in training in any area they choose, Giuliano says. Consultants also receive commissions on additional billings if they are able to grow an account.

Catalyst Consulting attracts talent by creating an entrepreneurial business atmosphere in addition to offering competitive salaries, Talwar says. Consultants there are encouraged to create new products and services, and some people even come to the company with business plans in hand. If the partners believe in the plan, they'll invest in it.

"A person here goes as far as they wish to go. We have no bureaucracy, no time lines," Talwar says.

Several Chicago CIOs say they don't want the cost of their consultants and contractors to rise any further. Though the Y2K-induced backlog of projects should lead to a strong market for contractors and consultants, CIOs say they want to stop paying year 2000 project rates.

"It's tough to keep staff members motivated when consultants working alongside them are earning a lot more money and yet have less skill," says Mari Nimmerrichter, director of IT at the American Bar Association.

At the Chicago Board of Trade, where some contractors have 12-year contracts, renegotiating and lowering their hourly rates reduced expenses by about 20% without reducing capacity, says Jim Amaral, senior vice president and CIO at the firm.

"The arrangement is mutually satisfying because we're each willing to commit to future projects," he says.

Marc Berlow

"It's tough to keep staff members motivated when consultants working alongside them are earning a lot more money and yet have less skill."

– Mari Nimmerrichter, American Bar Association

Work hard or be hardly working

Commitment to the Midwestern work ethic is key for consultants and contractors who want to work in Chicago, sources say. "Chicagoans are very serious about their careers," Johnson says. "Work is important and a priority."

In addition to working hard, the skills CIOs want from their external resources are the ability to work effectively on teams, project management experience and communication skills.

"You must be able to work with clients and learn their needs and wants and be able to reconcile conflicts between those," Reck says.

Many sources say the most successful contractors are those who have interpersonal skills that go beyond an ability to simply communicate well. For example, consultants and contractors who want to work at GATX Corp. must agree to abide by the company's seven core values, says Tobi D'Andrea, senior vice president for information technology. "If they don't fit these values, they're out," she says.

One open question is how local businesses might value their IT projects next year if the national economy were to slow or if the stock market took a dive. "If the economy craters, people will look at project returns much more closely and the bar for determining which projects get done will be raised," Nimmerrichter says.

However, several sources say many technology projects may be recession-proof. "IT consulting would be strong here even in a down economy," Weinstein says. "There's been a fundamental shift by decision-makers to see technology as strategic, not discretionary."

So while the blues will always be sung in Chicago, IT contractors aren't likely to sing along — unless they become Cubs fans, of course. ▸

Watson is a freelance writer in Chicago.

fun and frenzied

IT pros take note:

User, vendor and consulting companies in Chicago all offer exciting and challenging jobs and good buys. But they'll work you hard

By Joanie Wexler

The Greater Chicago area is a major financial and business center that's home to 35 *Fortune* 500 companies, boasts its own "technology corridor" in the western suburbs and offers nearly 800 information technology consulting firms as possible employers. With a population of almost 3 million, and another 4 million in its neighboring communities, the Chicago area has the third-largest labor pool in the nation.

Chicago itself is attractive to many because of its rich cultural diversity and practical Midwestern values. Be advised, though, that down-home family values don't necessarily translate into guaranteed eight-hour days. As the uniting force of information and communications technology renders the business world increasingly androgynous, the 10- to 12-hour days long notorious on the coasts are creeping into many Chicago IT environments as well.

But rest assured that there's an abundance of exciting IT career opportunities with competitive compensation and seemingly unlimited training available to keep employees on the leading edge. Let's just hope you revel in co-o-old winters. If so, here's a look at the cultures you can expect in some sample companies in the Windy City.

IT User Cultures

TRIBUNE CO., CHICAGO

This 14,000-person company owns four daily newspapers, as well as 17 TV stations. Its IT department recently embarked on a 180-degree change from being a chargeback, budget-focused group to a forward-thinking, customer-friendly organization, says Cartée Bales, director of systems development and support. Bales joined the 120-person IT staff two years ago, after working throughout the western U.S. as a consultant at a vendor company.

Bales says he was pleasantly surprised by the flexibility and amenability to change that he found within Tribune compared with the western states, particularly Southern California. "I just assumed I'd find in Chicago a stodgy information systems staff that would never pry their fingers off a 3270 terminal," he says. "I was completely wrong. I'm in a work-hard culture, projects move quickly and the staff is quick to embrace new ideas."

Tribune happens to own the Chicago Cubs, and, fittingly, the IT department recently instituted a work model built around a baseball metaphor. People working on different projects become teams. "Things we do well translate into 'hits' and 'runs'; mistakes count as 'outs,' " Bales explains. "The 'winners' end up getting a night a month at Wrigley Field to themselves to play a real game of baseball there."

COMMONWEALTH EDISON CO., CHICAGO

IT opportunities are on the rise at this utility company, largely because the state of Illinois, like many others, is deregulating the power industry. Because of this, the utility, which has served more than 3.4 million customers in northern Illinois for more than 100 years, is revamping its applications and systems

as it moves from monopoly status to a competitive environment. "This means that the corporate culture is changing to become more aggressive as the IT group beefs up its efforts to deliver top-level service to internal and external customers," says Dan Hill, ComEd's IT director. The company's goal is for its IT staff to be among the top 25% of IT performers around the country, adds Margie Miller, IT resource director at ComEd.

"We are building applications to enable the lottery system, to give customers online access to certain information about their accounts and to support the billing requirements of new kinds of customers such as power wholesalers," Hill says. ComEd's IT staff has swelled to 600 during the past two years because of demands caused by deregulation, year 2000 projects and an internal policy to decrease the company's dependence on contractors, Miller says.

The company describes its IT group as flexible in work hours. It supports telecommuting and has no enforced dress code. As with other companies, workdays can stretch to 10 and 12 hours during projects.

AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, CHICAGO
Barry Bernier, team leader for applications development at the AMA, says the organization is "hot and heavy" into converting core processing systems from IMS mainframe databases to client/server systems. The nonprofit organization is undergoing a "changing of the guard" by creating a more business-aligned IT staff of approximately 125 people, Bernier says. "We now have a business person assigned to all IT projects, and they participate in our planning sessions. This is absolutely necessary, I think, for success. You need buy-in from the users you're supporting and the ability to manage their expectations."

His new organization offers a traditional career path, Bernier says, starting with programming and working up to senior systems analyst. "Then you need to decide if you want to stay in technology or management. Generally, your pay scale will rise faster if you take the management route."

IT Vendor Cultures

3COM CORP. (CARRIER SYSTEMS GROUP), ROLLING MEADOWS AND MOUNT PROSPECT, ILL.
3Com's carrier group was U.S. Robotics before being purchased by 3Com Corp. in 1997. The group develops and manufactures infrastructure equipment for network service providers.

"You don't have the start-up mania in the Chicago area that you do in Boston or Silicon Valley," says Richard Dynarski, a consulting engineer at the company.

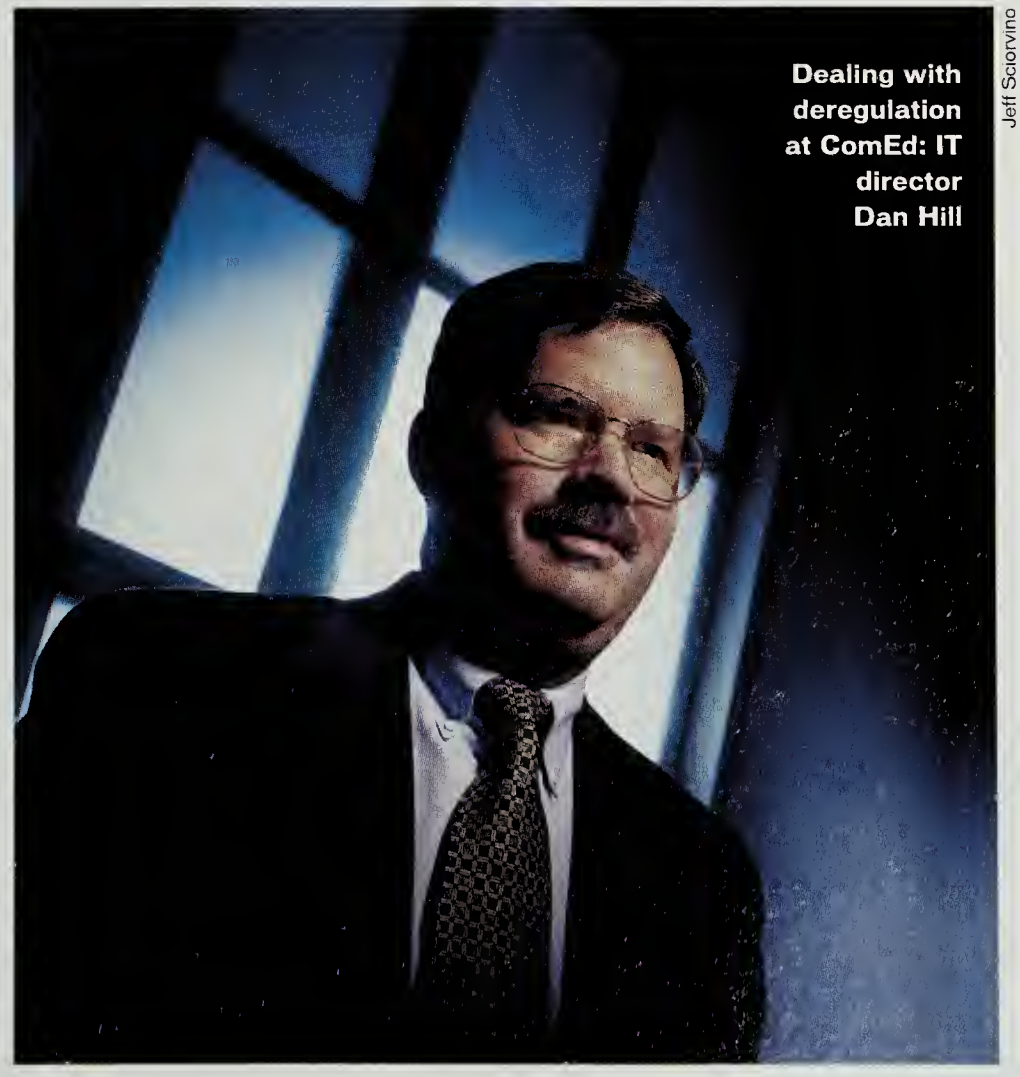
Dynarski says he feels that the really big-ticket compensation items — get-rich-quick stock options — are more abundant in the areas where start-ups are more prevalent. He describes his current work environment as casual and flexible, allowing engineers to work the hours they choose and the projects they wish to work on. He says product marketing decides which products should be developed. Then it's up to Dynarski and his peers to figure out among themselves how to implement them. "We have a huge amount of freedom here," he says.

LUCENT TECHNOLOGIES INC., NAPERVILLE, ILL.
Hilton Nicholson worked in Lucent company offices in North Carolina and New Jersey before landing in the company's Naperville location, about

continued on page 15

"... the corporate culture is changing to become more aggressive ..."

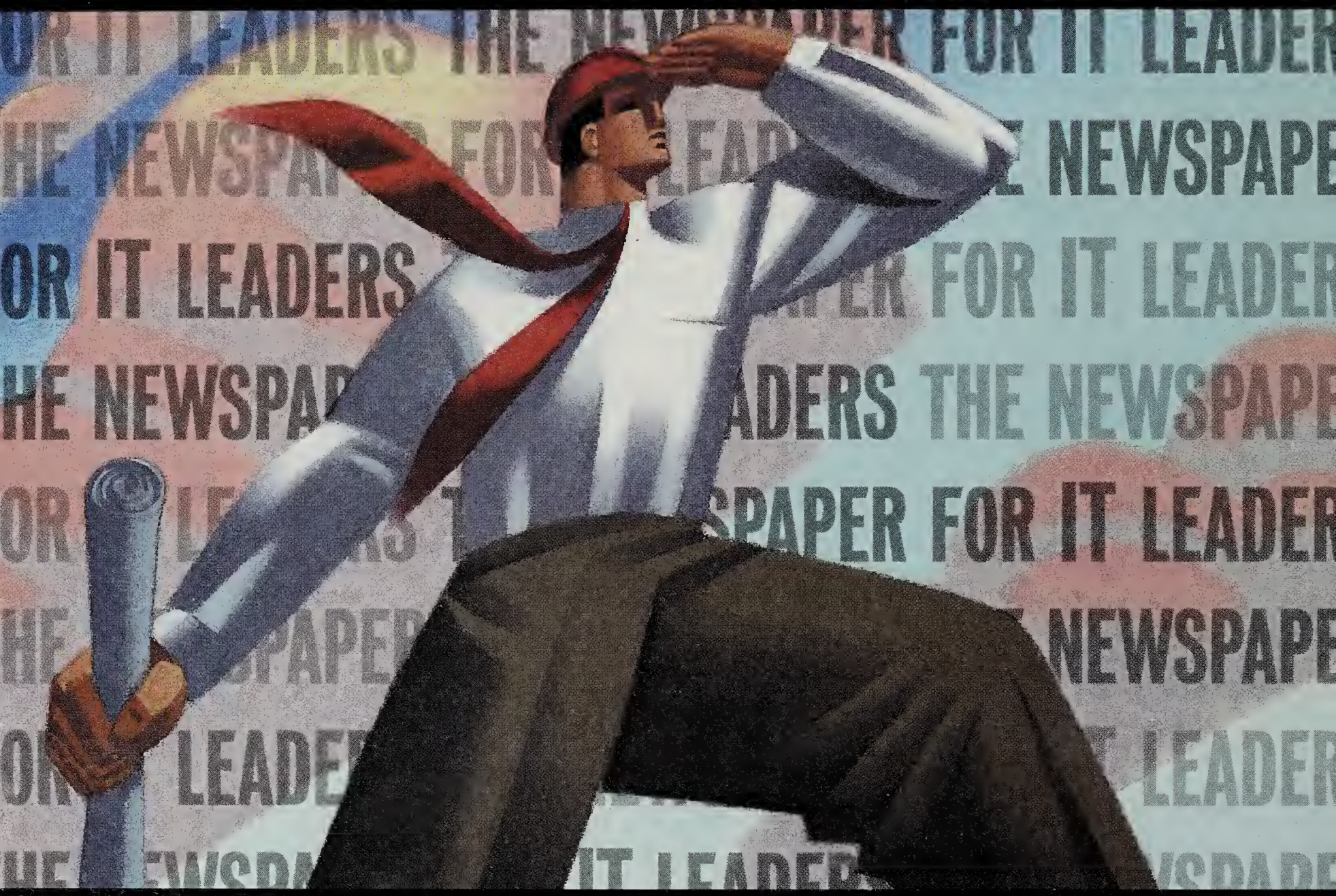
– Dan Hill, IT director, ComEd



Dealing with deregulation at ComEd: IT director Dan Hill

Jeff Sciorvino

BUILDERS
OF THE IT ECONOMY



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"You don't have the **start-up** mania in the **Chicago** area that you do in Boston or Silicon Valley ..."

– Richard Dynarski, Consulting engineer, 3Com

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30 miles west of Chicago. The Naperville facility comprises mostly research and development personnel — approximately 11,000 of them — in the areas of wireless development, 5ESS central-office voice switches and voice over IP technologies.

Nicholson, voice over packet product management director, has nearly a full alphabet of letters behind his name, the most recent being MBA. He bridges the gap between business requirements and technology and says that at such a large research-and-development facility, "coders can lose sight of the real world. I bring the extensive view — both technology and business — to the R&D table."

His Naperville gig is "middle-of-the-road," Nicholson says, in terms of stress and formality, compared with other Lucent locations. "The Greensboro, N.C., corporate center was laid-back, while New Jersey was fast-paced and caused an extreme amount of stress." He says his stint in Naperville is in an informal environment that supports telecommuting. "The important thing is that you deliver on your commitments," he says.

"We have a huge amount of freedom here" – 3Com's Richard Dynarski

Marc Berlow

IT Consulting Cultures

KPMG PEAT MARWICK LLP, CHICAGO

Todd A. McIntosh, a senior consultant, transferred to the Chicago office's IT group from Washington, where "there were more technical issues to solve for clients." Chicago clients tend to be tech-savvy and look for systems-oriented assistance, he says, such as transitioning homegrown enterprise resource planning to new applications based on Oracle Corp., SAP AG and PeopleSoft Inc. software.

McIntosh has also worked in a user environment for a defense contractor. He says the advantages of a consulting environment are that you can keep finding challenges and avoid the "boring maintenance stuff," and the pay tends to be higher. "On the other hand, it is more stressful," he says, admitting to often working a 50- to 60-hour workweek. "But [depending on the project], the hours are cyclical."

COLLECTIVE TECHNOLOGIES, CHICAGO

Specializing in systems management services for distributed computer environments, this company employs more than 350 consultants nationwide. About 40 work out of the Chicago office.

The 5-year-old company uses what upper-Midwestern district manager Alphonse S. Arias calls a unique hiring process. Every six weeks, it hosts a "hiring weekend" that resembles a sorority/fraternity rush by mixing partying with interviewing. Candidates who have been screened by phone are flown in and spend quality time with existing employees, who collectively decide who is hired.

"The main thing we try to determine is that candidates have a balance of people and technical skills," Arias says. Listening and conversational abilities are about equal in importance to technical skills, he says.

The company also advocates a team-building approach to better serve customers — performance reviews are related to how well consultants collaborate. This fosters a cooperative, rather than competitive, atmosphere among peers. ▸

Wexler is a freelance writer in Campbell, Calif.

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